

[Sailors versus Rats]

Tales - Anecdotes

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER WILLIAM WOOD

ADDRESS 7012, 67th Place, Glendale, L. I.

DATE December 19, 1938

SUBJECT SAILORS VERSUS RATS

1. Date and time of interview

12/12/38 11 A. M.; 12/13/38 10 A. M.; 12/14/38, 10 A. M.

2. Place of interview The Recreation Room of the Seamen's Institute, 25 South Street,
New York City

3. Name and address of informant

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant. None. I met
Captain Mathieson while doing some research work in the Joseph Conrad Library

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5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you None.

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

The Recreation Room is situated on the third floor of the Seamen's Institute. It is comfortably but not elaborately furnished with tables and chairs. There is a piano for the diversion of such as may care to play on it. The tables are well supplied with a large variety of current magazines. Conversation and smoking are permitted here, although not-of course-in the adjacent library.

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NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER William Wood

ADDRESS 7012-67th Place Glendale, L. I.

DATE December 19, 1938

SUBJECT SAILORS VERSUS RATS

1. Ancestry Norwegian His father was a sea captain
2. Place and date of birth London, England; December, 1871.
3. Family

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4. Places lived in, with dates London, in his infancy; Arendal, Norway, in his childhood and early youth.
5. Education, with dates His formal education, received at the Middle School at Arendal, has been augmented by a lifetime of reading, study and research.
6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates Mariner for 50 years, of which time many years were spent as first and second officer and 19 years as commander.
7. Special skills and interests History, Astronomy, Oceanography, Navigation, Seamanship, Literature, Philately
8. Community and religious activities None mentioned
9. Description of informant See Extra Comment (Form D) this date.
10. Other Points gained in interview

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER William Wood

ADDRESS 7012-67th Place, Glendale, L. I.

DATE December 19, 1938

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SUBJECT SAILORS VERSUS RATS "Ten thousand rats are coming this way..... They are not to be told by the dozen or score; By thousands they come, and by myriads and more." God's Judgment on a Bishop.

There is no living creature - not even the [horrible?] (?) shark - that is more detested by sailormen than the rat. To this very [?] day this animal is an object of superstition as well as of hatred and disgust. A century ago, and less, sailors refused to commence a passage on a Friday, fearing bad luck would come to them. A shark following a ship was regarded as an omen of death. A Finlander among the crew was looked upon as a probable cause of impending misfortunes; foul weather, unfavorable winds and other calamities. These are traditions of the past. They are gone with the mermaids, the sea serpents and the phantom ships.

But even the modern seaman will not stay long in a rat-infested ship if he can help it, and there still are many sailors who would hesitate to put to sea in a vessel if they should notice the rats leaving her. This seems a strange contradiction. Every precaution is taken and every device employed to prevent these vermin from boarding a ship at the docks, yet the superstition superstitious mind is filled with alarm when they are seen running ashore in numbers.

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No one knows when it was that rats first took to the sea. It may have been when man first crossed a river on a raft of logs. Anyhow, through man and his ships rats have spread and multiplied on every continent with the exception of the Antarctic, and practically on every island in the seven seas. On Lord Howe Island the rats nest in the palms, devouring the seeds, the only product exported and the islanders' main source of making a living. This palm, "Kentia Fosteriana," does not come to seed anywhere else in the world. Formerly, it grew only on this island, which consists of but a few square miles - a mere mountain top - out in the Tasman Sea.

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In Western Samoa, [where?] once had a plantation, rats are the greatest pest the planters have to put up with. There, these clever animals climb the trees and eat up the cacao beans before they are ripe for picking, and cause immense damage to the struggling growers, who spend an enormous amount of time and money in an almost futile effort to rid themselves of their worst enemy.

There are thousands of uninhabited coral islands in the tropical seas where rats are the only mammals. They destroy untold quantities of the eggs and the young of birds and of turtles. In all instances the rodents have been carried to these remote islands by ships; whalers, occasionally, making calls, and other vessels that have been wrecked. So we see that rats can find a way to make a good living where man cannot exist.

An age-old superstition amongst sailors came to my notice shortly after I had commenced my schooling, now sixty years ago. At that time they were still building wooden ships in Norway. Especially so in the vicinity of my home town, Arendal. Although this seaport had only five thousand inhabitants, it had more ships and a larger tonnage than any other city on the continent of Europe, north of Hamburg. Even servant girls were known to have shares in ships. There were, or had been, one or more shipyards in every near-by fjord and sheltered inlet.

The latest ship that had been built at Natvik was ready for sea. One of our neighbors who had been employed in her construction was to sail in the vessel as 3rd ship's carpenter. It was summer time, and early on the morning of the day of sailing he trundled his clothes chest on a handcart from his little farm to the wharf, arriving there before anyone was stirring on the ship's deck. Shouldering the heavy chest, he had carried it half way up the gangplank when he saw a sight that made him pause. A long procession of rats covered the forward mooring line. One after another they were walking; carefully, slowly, deliberately, from the ship to the dock. Turning his gaze to the mooring line aft, the carpenter beheld a similar army of rats, taking their departure in single file. This was sufficient warning. He quietly descended the plank and replaced his clothes chest on

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the hand cart. Then he went on board and got his chest of tools which had been sent to the ship the previous day. Dragging it after him he reached the dock as quickly as possible, and loading his property on the cart, retraced his way home as quickly as the heavy burden permitted him to get there. He hid himself in the woods on a hillside, from which place of concealment he watched until he saw a tug-boat come and take the vessel down the river and out to sea. Then he returned home to his wife and children. Soon [i/?] afterwards, the owners hailed him into court for not having joined his ship, and there he told his story about the rats leaving the vessel. He also told them what every sailor knows and what every man in that courtroom knew: when the rats leave a ship, it is time for [you?] to leave her. This vessel, sailing with a cargo of lumber for South Africa, was never seen nor heard of after leaving the English Channel.

During the fifty years I spent at sea I sailed in many vessels that were more or less infested with rats. One ship was so overrun with them, and they were so bold and ferocious, that they were a torment and a / pest to all on board. In no other vessel have I seen so many rats. And in spite of all known methods of exterminating them - dogs, cats, traps, and fumigation - there always seemed to be a sufficient number of survivors to multiply rapidly and continue to annoy us.

In 1915 I was appointed master of the four masted barque, Susanne Vinnen, which had been seized from the Germans by the British and interned at Newcastle, N. S. W., when England had declared war on Germany. She had been lying at Newcastle for about a year, loaded with coal and with a full supply of stores and provisions on board, at the time I took charge. The government of Western Australia, who had acquired ownership, renamed her, Carrabin.

When I moved on board with a full crew of thirty men I found the officers' and sailors' quarters, and indeed the whole ship, in such a disgustingly filthy state that it took all hands several days of hard work to get the vessel cleaned up. We also found that the Carrabin was swarming with rats; so many that none of us had seen such a condition on any ship

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before. It seems that the Germans, before leaving for the internment camp at a country town near Sydney, had removed the lids from all the bread and flour tanks in the ship's lazarette, thereby encouraging the rats and making it easier for them to multiply, as well as to spoil the food. The naval guard who had been keeping watch on the vessel had not taken the trouble to replace the lids; so that the rats, after feasting and breeding for a whole year, now overran the whole ship, just as the Germans must have planned that they should do. The animals had grown fat and saucy. At night they were everywhere, all over the ship. They ran races on deck, chasing each other away up into the rigging. They swarmed in and out of the lifeboats; ran around the cabins, scurrying into the bunks, even, and crawling over our faces and bodies, waking us out of our sleep. They screeched and fought above our heads in the space between the cabin ceiling and the poop deck. Whole battalions of rats were occupying the lazarette, where the provisions lay. There they were so numerous and of such immense growth that / our dog and cats were terrified, and resisted all efforts to induce them to go down. I couldn't think of forcibly throwing them in and locking them up there. The rats would have killed and eaten them. I did try the experiment of putting one of the cats - a very fine ratter - into the place for a few minutes, but she screamed in mortal terror, making such blood-curdling noises, that I quickly released her. She was glad to escape from the perils of that dark place and I didn't blame her.

I purchased and caused to be set a lot of new traps, and got a couple of extra cats, nearly full grown. My wife brought her Scotch terrier, Mung, on board, 5 and we made preparations to do battle with the enemy in real earnest. There was one huge tomcat, that the Germans had left behind, who proved himself not only the best ratter of all our domestic animals, but also a very clever and painstaking teacher. He took delight in giving the younger cats valuable instruction in the art of catching and destroying their traditional foes. And this is the way he taught them:

He would catch a rat, carry it out on deck, place it in front of the young cats and let them watch his technic of attacking and killing it. After a few days of these lessons, Tommy

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would give his eager pupils some actual practice. He would catch a rat, as usual, but instead of killing it himself he would set it down on the deck and supervise his scholars in their attempts to follow the instruction they had received. He would watch closely the attempts of the younger cats as they tried to catch and kill the latest victim. If mister Rat got away from his tormentors, he didn't go far. Thomas Cat soon pounced upon him and returned him to the young novitiates for additional treatment, watching the procedure very carefully until the rodent finally was dispatched. Then our hero would promptly catch another subject for the next lesson, and stand by until his young comrades transformed it into a corpse. After a few days of this excellent training the apprentices became almost as skillful as their master.

The Carrabin was towed from Newcastle to Melbourne, where we discharged half of our cargo of coal and then went into drydock to have the ship's bottom cleaned and painted. Then I had the whole vessel fumigated with sulphur, as a result of which we found two hundred rats dead from the fumes. After we put to sea again, bound for Freemantle, in Western Australia, we found that there still were plenty of rats in the ship. Arriving at Freemantle, we discharged the balance of our coal at a wharf on which there was piled a mountain of wheat in sacks; probably about 20,000 tons. It was without a covering of any kind; did not have even a tarpaulin over it. Much of the wheat was in a state of decay, and untold hordes of rats were feasting there; countless multitudes of them, scampering over and around the bags of grain. To estimate their number at a million surely would be no exaggeration. How many of these moved on board the Carrabin, I could not tell; at least a few hundreds left their happy home in that huge grain pile, in a spirit of adventure, perhaps to make the long passage to England, where we were bound for.

Once at sea, in the genial climate of the Indian Ocean, the rats bred and multiplied to such an extent that at night time they practically took charge of the ship. All of their old pranks, that had made life so miserable for us all when lying at the dock in Newcastle, were renewed with added vigor. Once again the deck and the living quarters fore and aft became literally alive with these uninvited and unwelcome guests. Thee The cabin ceiling

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reechoed again the sound of then sprinting feet and their discordant squeak, as they fought and chased and bit and clawed at one another, in the narrow space that separated the paneling over our heads, from the timbers of the poop dock above. So infested was this place that the noise made sleep impossible. When the carpenter removed some of the panels, following my orders, we discovered rats' nests with litters of young in them. We found caches of food, bread, biscuits and nuts, and nutshells. Later on we found out that the rats had removed all but a few handfuls from a whole sack of nuts which I had purchased for Christmas, before leaving Australia. With every roll of the ship, the sound of the nut rolling over our heads had added to our annoyance.

The men in the forecastle were as badly plagued. No part of the ship escaped. Rats found their way into the boats again; they sometimes found their way into the water barrels, and drowned there. One sailor had the thick skin of his heel gnawed away while he was asleep. What a sleeper! The rat had left so little of the skin that the heel was actually bleeding when the man awoke, and I had to give him medical treatment.

Despite the heroic work of our dog, Mung, / and that of our several cats - all battle - scarred with vicious bites from rats - the pests continued to multiply.

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Conversing with the mate, one day, I told him how a friend of mine, master of a ship owned by The Alaska Packers, had rid his vessel of an enormous army of rats in less than a month, by the use of two ferrets. At the same time I voiced a wish that we had a dozen ferrets aboard the Carrabin.

The mate's face suddenly lit up. He said, "I'll make you a trap that will catch them by the hundreds!"

I said, "Good for you. Go ahead and make it," and the mate immediately ordered the carpenter to fit a lid to an empty beef barrel slightly smaller in circumference than its top. This lid he fastened on a pivot so that it balanced evenly and could be tipped with the

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touch of a finger. He greased the inside of the barrel and piled a few bricks at the bottom, one on top of another. A piece of toasted cheese, about three inches square, was nailed on one side of the / lid, near the center, and a small piece of lead was nailed on the other side, just heavy enough to balance the weight of the cheese. The barrel was taken into the lazarette and the mate poured in a strong solution of caustic soda till it came up to the topmost brick. The purpose of this artificial island in the center of the fiery liquid was to enable a rat to climb up to a place where he could sit and squeal for a minute or two, and thus attract more rats who might want to join in the feast, or the fight, or whatever entertainment their rat-intellecks might decide was going on inside the barrel. The theory was, that as quickly as one rat scumbled to his burns, and slid off the brick into the hot solution, another / one would be ready to take his place and to continue the squealing. The idea worked out splendidly, for on the following morning our barrel was half full of dead rats. We fished them out with tongs and dumped them over the side in buckets. Night after night for the remainder remainder of the passage we continued to catch rats in this manner; an average of fifty a night was the mate's estimate. I shudder to think how [?] we should have fared but for his ingenious device. It certainly was the most efficient trap I have ever seen or heard of. Yet, in spite of the thousands we caught, the rats continued to breed so fast that we were tormented by them all the way to London.

We arrived there safely, without encountering any German submarines. And in this respect we considered ourselves very fortunate; for we spent six days tacking against head winds in the English Channel, during which time we actually heard gunfire and sailed through some wreckage. We were thankful indeed to reach the Thames.

After unloading our cargo of yarra-wood we lay empty for a long time, waiting for an opportunity to go into dry-dock. I thought this would give me a good chance to renew my war on the rats. London is noted for professional ratcatchers who, for generations - yes, for centuries - have kept within their own families the jealously guarded secrets of their

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peculiar calling. It is generally believed that their success in ridding ships of vermin rests in their methods of baiting their traps. No doubt each family has its own especial formula.

The man I engaged for the job came on board with his two sons and set numerous traps; in the hold, on the decks and in the lazarette. On the first morning every trap was full of rats, on the second morning there were not quite as many and on the third morning there were only a few. My benefactor told me that my ship was now rid of rats, and I gladly paid him his fee of twenty pounds sterling. These persons make a very comfortable living, and the services they render are usually well worth their cost. However, I had already had so many miserable disappointments that I still felt half afraid the rats were not entirely exterminated even now; and I knew well that if any remained in the vessel it would not be long until I should be tormented again.

Before leaving London, I had the good fortune to make the acquaintance of a doctor, whose son was to sail with me as an apprentice. This physician gave me twenty small glass tubes containing a virus, which he called the Liverpool virus, for use in case the rats should become troublesome again. We sailed from London for Port Arthur, Texas, carrying only ballast.

The Carrabin's passage through the English Channel was uneventful except for a narrow escape we had from being blown up in a minefield. Out in the Atlantic the rats commence commenced their antics once more. Perhaps these were new ones; Thames natives, possibly. Anyhow, we lost no time in doing battle with them. We smeared the good doctor's virus, on toasted bread and toasted cheese, and placed the tempting morsels in the rats' former retreats. Day after day for some time after, we found dead rats on deck, at first only a few but an increasingly large number as the days passed. The virus did its work well. After eating the bait the rats became very sick and developed a terrific thirst and came / out of their hiding places and up on deck to look for water. So powerful was the poison that it appeared to consume the pests, actually to shrivel them up. There seemed to be nothing left in the carcasses but skin and bone.

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What a relief! Seven tubes of the virus cleared the ship entirely of rats. After we reached Port Arthur we loaded a cargo of kerosene for South Africa and Western Australia. We never were pestered with rats again during my stay in the Carrabin. It is quite possible that the vessel itself never again harbored them. Those who believe in sailors' superstitions would be prepared to swear that no rats went on board the vessel in Western [Australiathat?] trip. Here is what occurred:

After our cargo was discharged at Freemantle it so happened that I left the Carrabin, and the first mate was made master of the vessel. He lost her near Queenstown, when he encountered a German submarine on the passage home.

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM D Extra Comment

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER William Wood

ADDRESS 7012-67th Place, Glendale, L. I.

DATE December 19, 1938

SUBJECT SAILORS VERSUS RATS

Captain John Mathieson, the narrator of this story has spent fifty of his sixty-seven years at sea; thirty years in sailing vessels. He has been master of some very fine ships, including the barque, "Antiope," which he commanded for ten years. He holds a Master's License (unlimited) for sail and steam vessels of the United States, and Master's Certificates (unlimited) for British and Norwegian vessels.

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Despite his achievements, the captain is a very modest man when discussing them. His personality is such as to command respect and confidence. It is that of a man in whose care the passengers and crew of a ship would entrust their lives without the slightest hesitation. In the half century spent at sea he never has been shipwrecked.

Captain Mathieson recently has completed writing a book-length narrative of some of his own experience. It soon is to be offered for publication. He contemplates translating from Norwegian into English a concise history of Scandinavian countries.